

Committee on Resources

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STATEMENT OF FRAN P. MAINELLA, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION & PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING THE YOSEMITE VALLEY PLAN AT YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

APRIL 22, 2003

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your subcommittee at this oversight hearing on the Yosemite Valley Plan here at Yosemite National Park. I am accompanied by Durand Jones, Deputy Director; Jon Jarvis, Regional Director for the Pacific West Region; and Michael Tollefson, Superintendent of Yosemite National Park.

It is a pleasure to have you and the subcommittee here at the park, and we appreciate the opportunity you have provided for us to update you on the important projects that are being undertaken here. These include the park's transportation plans and the identification of potential additional campsites for park visitors.

I would like to begin by discussing visitation here at Yosemite National Park and how it fits with the implementation of the Yosemite Valley Plan. Two decades ago, annual visitation at Yosemite was about 2.5 million, and about 80 percent of the visitors stayed overnight while 20 percent came for the day. Now the park receives about 3.4 million visitors annually, and the proportion of overnight versus day-use visitors is the reverse: 80 percent are day users while 20 percent stay overnight. We believe this change has occurred largely because more visitors are using lodging in Yosemite's gateway communities. The Yosemite Valley Plan recognizes this trend and seeks changes that will accommodate the higher day use of the valley and the park while improving the experience of all visitors to Yosemite and protecting the park's resources.

At the same time, the Yosemite Valley Plan also seeks to respect the traditions and strong connections many visitors feel with Yosemite. We know from surveys that fully half of the park's visitors are making return visits. The public comment periods for the Yosemite Valley Plan and the Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan, both of which were completed in 2000, drew more than 22,000 comments, demonstrating an extraordinary level of public interest in the park's future. This public involvement helped guide the National Park Service toward adoption of final plans that we believe will preserve and enhance the essence of what so many people find special about visiting Yosemite.

First Phase Projects

We are making significant progress on 15 projects that comprise the first phase of implementation of the Yosemite Valley Plan, as reported to Congress last year. These are listed on the chart we have labeled as "Exhibit 1" and are identified in this statement by numbers that correspond to the chart. This chart, which includes a timeline for the projects, is also attached to this statement.

The Yosemite Falls Project (1) is a tremendous public-private partnership, funded predominately by the Yosemite Fund. As a project in which the park is working closely with the private sector and local communities, it exemplifies what Secretary Gale Norton refers to as the "4 C's": consultation, coordination, and communication all in the service of conservation. The major trail improvements have begun and the main portion of the project, the relocation of the parking lot and restrooms out of the primary view of the waterfalls, will be completed in the fall of 2004.

We will be removing the Cascades Diversion Dam (2) this fall. We are beginning Phase I of the Yosemite Lodge Project (3), which includes improvements for visitors enjoying the lodge in Yosemite. We are also designing the expansion of Camp 4 (4) and improvements to traffic flow on Northside Drive (5).

In addition, we have been working closely with the American Indian Council of Mariposa County in another important partnership to design an Indian Cultural Center (6) here in the Valley. This fall, the new Curry Village cabins (7) and employee housing to replace housing lost in the 1997 flood (8) will be completed. These projects will include new utility services, which will be the start of the valley-wide Master Utilities

Upgrade that will vastly improve conditions for modern electrical and other utility needs in the valley, while consolidating these functions in roadways and other previously disturbed areas so that sensitive resources in the park will be preserved.

The National Park Service will also be making important campground improvements in the eastern end of Yosemite Valley (9). These campground projects are especially important in meeting our goals of maintaining levels of camping opportunities consistent with the Yosemite Valley Plan, the Merced River Plan and the 1980 General Management Plan. They are a key component of the goal to eventually have 500 campsites available in the valley, 25 more than are currently available.

In addition to these critical projects, Yosemite has removed the Happy Isles Bridge (10), and is developing plans for the construction of an office building in El Portal to replace office space in the valley that was lost in the 1997 flood (11).

We are also developing an important strategy to restore degraded and lost riparian and wetland areas along the Merced River in former campground areas damaged in the 1997 floods (12). These riverbank areas and riparian zones are highly threatened components of the valley ecosystem within Yosemite and throughout the Sierra Nevada. Because of the unique value of these areas along the beautiful Merced River, enhanced visitor use is being integrated with restoration plans to offer more visitors opportunities to use these areas for a variety of activities, such as picnicking and hiking.

Shuttle Bus Replacement and Transportation

The transportation system for Yosemite will take a major step forward this year when the park orders the new valley shuttle bus fleet for use starting in 2005 (13). This new fleet will meet modern goals of fuel and emissions efficiencies and provide reliable alternative transportation. This is fundamental to reducing congestion, accommodating more visitors in the park, and improving the visitor experience in the valley.

After listening to our gateway communities and park visitors and conducting extensive analyses, the park decided to purchase new buses that use a proven technology known as a "diesel-electric hybrid" engine. The National Park Service studied many alternatives looking for ease of visitor use, reliability, and a reduction of emissions. We believe this hybrid design will meet the concerns of the public for the visitor experience, noise reduction, and improvement of air quality in Yosemite and the region. In addition to this new bus fleet, we are developing new shuttle bus stops (14) to accommodate the new buses and to improve the overall transportation experience in Yosemite Valley. Eventually these will be linked to the improved parking area at Yosemite Village (Camp 6) and other valley destinations.

On the subject of improved transportation, I would like to mention that the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS) is now entering its fourth year of providing visitors, gateway communities, and Yosemite employees an alternative to driving their own vehicles to Yosemite. YARTS provides excellent service and connections to broader transportation systems such as Amtrak. Visitor usage of YARTS has increased by about 20 percent in each of the last two years. Although ridership and revenues are increasing, in order to become fully functional, YARTS is still in need of strong support to help it expand and provide quality service. We are grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership in the development of YARTS, and to the many partners in the communities adjacent to Yosemite that have funded and continue to manage and support the YARTS system.

While we anticipate that visitor use of alternative transportation will continue to grow, I want to note that over the next five to seven years, while Yosemite Valley Plan projects are underway, the availability of parking for day visitors will not be curtailed. As the various implementation projects are undertaken, some parking areas will change but during this time there will be no net loss of day use private-vehicle parking spaces in the valley.

Campground Planning Studies

Mr. Chairman, the final item on our list is the Parkwide Campground Planning Study (15), recently prepared in response to the House Appropriations Committee report on the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2002. The report directed the National Park Service to undertake a study of the potential for expanded opportunities for additional camping in Yosemite National Park.

There are currently approximately 1,490 campsites within Yosemite National Park, including 475 within the valley. This study looked at 13 different areas outside the valley, determined the number and type of

campsites that could be reasonably accommodated at each location, and estimated the costs of constructing the new campsites. It identified 788 potential new campsites of various types within these areas. The study is a useful starting point for planning additional campsites, but it is not a formal decision document or a compliance document.

In reviewing this study, the park found that constructing the majority of these new sites would require extensive compliance along with amendments to the 1980 General Management Plan, as modified by the Yosemite Valley Plan, and the Merced River plan. However, the park could develop 204 of the identified sites while still complying with approved plans. If the additional 25 sites planned for Yosemite Valley are added to that number, that would increase number of planned campsites by 229, to a total of 1,719 for the park. Yet placement of campgrounds would still be limited to areas of Yosemite that were found through the planning process to be capable of withstanding the impacts of development.

In addition to the campground study requested by the House Appropriations Committee, the park has also prepared a report at your request, Mr. Chairman, on replacement of campsites in the Lower Pines, Lower River, and Upper River campground areas in the valley. This report identified the potential for some campsites in these areas. However, using these areas for campgrounds that serve a limited number of overnight visitors would preclude making them available for greater numbers of day visitors to enjoy for hiking, picnicking, bicycling, and other activities. And, developing campsites in these areas would require extensive compliance and amendments to the park's three approved plans, which would be very costly.

We share the concern of this subcommittee about the need to accommodate more visitors who wish to camp at Yosemite. The public's keen interest in camping has been demonstrated in many ways, including the fact that more than 1,400 of the 22,000 comments we received on the Yosemite Valley Plan and the Merced River plan addressed camping in some form. As we work to increase the availability of campsites within Yosemite National Park, we are also cooperating with our gateway partners, as well as other federal and state agencies, to increase the capacity for providing camping opportunities outside the park.

Mr. Chairman, to conclude, the projects underway at Yosemite are designed to serve more visitors in better ways, and to enhance the experience of everyone who visits this magnificent park, now and in the future. They represent some of the most exciting projects we are engaged in anywhere in the National Park System today. We look forward to moving ahead with these projects with the involvement of our neighbors and partners, and with your continued interest and support. We would be pleased to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee may have.